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McFarlane Tells Group He Believes Some U.S. POWs Remain in Indochina

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President Reagan's national security adviser has told a private business group that he believes U.S. prisoners of war are still being held in Indochina and that the U.S. should step up efforts to gather conclusive information about any POWs there.

The comments, by Robert C. McFarlane, leave a different impression from previous White House statements that the U.S. was using all applicable intelligence capabilities to determine what happened to the missing Americans, whose fate has been debated ever since the nation ended its combat involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973.

The national security adviser's remarks came in response to questions last Wednesday at a semiannual forum for business executives and political consultants. The ses-

sions, sponsored by syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, are held under ground rules that require that all remarks made at them by public officials are off the record, according to Mr. Evans. But former Congressman John LeBoutillier, a conservative Republican from New York, recorded the talk and made the tape available to this newspaper.

Mr. LeBoutillier and another symposium participant, John L. Thornton, a vice president of a Wall Street investment banking firm, said they weren't told the session was off the record.

Karna Small, spokeswoman for the national security adviser, said, "This account is a gross misrepresentation of Mr. McFarlane's views." She declined to elaborate in any way on the ground the session was off the record.

On the tape recording, Mr. McFarlane emphasized that he was expressing his personal feeling. "How I really feel about it," Mr. McFarlane said to the group. "I think there have to be live Americans there." He acknowledged that there wasn't any conclusive proof that U.S. military or civilian personnel are being held by communist governments in the region but said, "There is quite a lot of evidence given by people who have no ulterior motives and no reason to lie, and they're telling things that they have seen."

Mr. McFarlane was critical of U.S. efforts to find out what happened to nearly 2,500 Americans still unaccounted for. "What we need to do is to have better human intelligence in Vietnam," Mr. McFarlane said. "Now we don't. It takes time to get it. But I wouldn't pretend to you that we have done enough to even start. And that's bad. And that's a failure."

In the past, the administration has maintained that resolving the issue of Americans missing in action was a high priority, with President Reagan telling a gathering of MIA relatives in January 1983 that "the intelligence assets of the U.S. are fully focused on this issue."

Mr. McFarlane did say that he believed the Reagan administration has made progress by continuing to press the Vietnamese government for an accounting of the missing Americans. He also indicated that U.S. efforts to collect better intelligence on the subject would be stepped up. "We are doing more, (but) there is more that we ought to be doing than we are. And I think we shall very soon."

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